Mother-Led Families in Prince Edward Island

Prince Edward Island
Advisory Council on the Status of Women
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MOTHER-LED FAMILIES
ON
PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

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Section I

INTRODUCTION TO OUR PROJECT

"This was never supposed to happen to me.
It wasn't in my dreams."

Section I

INTRODUCTION TO OUR PROJECT

BACKGROUND

The P.E.I. Advisory Council on the Status of Women has identified a serious gap in our understanding of single mothers in Prince Edward Island. The number of single mothers has increased sharply in P.E.I. as have the number of children being raised in these families. These mother-led families face a variety of social, legal, and economic disadvantages, and there is a large discrepancy between their needs and the programs and services that currently exist to meet those needs.

Information on mother-led families in P.E.I. has been based on quantitative data; little qualitative information has been sought from meeting with these mothers throughout the province and learning about their experiences. The statistics highlight the poverty and difficulty of these families but give no indication of the strengths and positive experiences. Mother-led families have been branded as "incomplete" and have not been perceived as real and legitimate families. In response to these needs the Ad Hoc Committee on Mother-led Families commissioned **Smith Green & Associates** to undertake the following research. The study was funded in part by the Secretary of State.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of the study is to collect and analyze information on the experiences of single mothers and their families with respect to personal, social, legal and economic concerns in order to gather information needed to effect political action and social change.

APPROACH

The approach used in our study is based on qualitative research. The focus is on obtaining a description of how being a mother-led family is experienced by women who live it. Qualitative research begins with descriptions of women's actual experience as the basis for building analyses and taking action. This type of analysis ensures that actions developed have a basis in reality. The research was greatly facilitated by the willingness of the women to share their experiences, thoughts and feelings. They were open and frank without exception in describing aspects of their personal lives. Interviews lasted from one to three hours. This qualitative approach provides us with a high degree of confidence in our analysis.

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in four phases:

- understanding the issue
- assessing the real situation
- discussion group consultation
- final analysis

Phase I -Understanding the Issue:

This phase involved a review of selected secondary sources including Statistics Canada reports and articles on mother-led families. Most of this information had a national perspective; few of these documents were specific to P.E.I. Statistical reports from P.E.I. Health and Social Services bearing on Social Assistance recipients were also reviewed. A broad working definition of a mother-led family, developed in conjunction with the Committee, was adopted for the purposes of this study.

Phase II - Assessing the Real Situation:

This phase required the greatest proportion of project time and resources. Our methodology included the following:

- A structured, but open-ended interview guide was developed by the study team and approved by the Committee.

- The guides were handwritten, friendly and personal and were intended to help create an informal atmosphere for the interview.

- The guide was pretested and modified accordingly.

- The Committee identified 30 women to participate in the study. The approach used in the selection was through requests to regional women's groups and by word of mouth.

- Selection was based on a number of demographic variables; marital status, rural/urban, age, employment, region.

- A letter of introduction from the committee explaining the study was sent to each selected participant.

- Four experienced women interviewers, representing a wide range of experience conducted the interviews.

- Interviews were conducted wherever convenient for the women; over lunch, in our offices, at kitchen tables over coffee, in the evening - in their own setting as much as possible; in most cases child care arrangements were made by the mothers to ensure concentration.

- The content of the information collected and the names of the participants remain confidential.

- A total of 29 interviews were completed; 1 woman declined.

Phase III - Discussion Group

During the Discussion Group the study team presented its approach and overall observations, highlighting specific strengths, difficulties, concerns and specific support systems which were most helpful and others which were least supportive. Experiences relating to social services were also reviewed. Participants of the discussion group included mothers from mother-led families, interested women and government agency representatives.

The purpose of the discussion group was to confirm that the study team had a "clear and honest" picture of the women's experiences, knowledge and needs. It was a means of ensuring that these experiences were passed on in the best possible way. In addition, participants were asked to aid the project team in assessing a possible plan of action for the future, to determine a possible route for the assisting of Mother-led families.

Phase IV - Preparation of the Report

The qualitative analysis process culminated in the preparation of a draft report which was reviewed by the Steering Committee and modified accordingly. All project findings were subjected to an inductive analysis process.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

No attempt was made to generalize the findings to claim that they were representative views of all mothers of mother-led families on P.E.I. The research represents the views and concerns of the women interviewed, although the study team is confident that the research provides a significant descriptive base for developing an analysis of mother-led families on P.E.I.

THIS REPORT

This report focuses on the qualitative findings of the project research - information from women about their everyday experiences as mother-led families. A summary overview about such families in Prince Edward Island is contained in Section 2. Section 3 contains a selection of stories told to us by the women during the interviews, describing the circumstances surrounding their becoming a single mother. Section 4 summarizes the study team's overall observations. Section 5 presents an analysis of the interviews conducted. Proposals for social action are presented in Section 6.

Section II

OVERVIEW OF MOTHER-LED FAMILIES PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

"I closed the door on the past and began a new life as a single person."

Section II

OVERVIEW OF MOTHER-LED FAMILIES ON PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

The following section presents 1) a profile of mother-led families and 2) a statistical overview of mother-led families in P.E.I. The profile is based on secondary sources and the most primary source, personal interviews with women in mother-led families. The focus is on qualitative analysis. This is necessary to ensure that a social action plan is based on the experience of these women, their needs and their aspirations. The statistical overview is based on Statistics Canada Census Data, the Health and Social Services Social Assistance data and other sources.

PROFILE OF A MOTHER-LED FAMILY

A major challenge faced by women in mother-led families is to combat the stigma placed on them by the society in which they live. Society labels them as abnormal, living in atypical situations, as being problem-ridden and 'incomplete'. The stigma may be less severe for widows although there is still concern about the incompleteness of their "family unit".

The stigma is inherent in the words used to describe these families. One parent families are judged in relation to the image of a "nuclear family" (mother, father, 2 children) and the labels carry with them a connotation of "not whole". (Examples, single, sole, lone, unmarried, unwed, unattached, broken home, divorced, separated.)

Many reports and statistics compiled by various government agencies make reference to "single parents", "lone parents", and "unattached individuals"; "single mothers" are mentioned but the term often refers only to those mothers who were never married and it is their status as unwed that is focused on.

Only 18% of these single parents in Canada are men, the remaining 82% of one parent families (1986 census) are led by mothers. Because women experience discrimination and face barriers to equal opportunity to a much greater extent than men, it is essential that issues specific to such inequity be addressed when discussing the experiences of "single parents". As long as the reference is to "single parents", the issues specific to mothers in mother-led families, and the inequalities in society can be ignored and the mothers will be blamed and will continue to be labelled in many cases as poor and lazy.

These women face difficulties that are compounded because they are women. For any political or social action to take place it is absolutely essential to understand these underlying circumstances, some of which are listed below.

- The majority of mothers get no support (financial or emotional) from the fathers of their children.

- There is a direct correlation between the length of time mothers are dependent on Social Services and the amount of money they receive from the fathers of their children.

- Many women working full-time must also depend on Social Services for assistance with housing and child care.

- In 8 job categories surveyed in P.E.I., women earn on average 45 cents to every 1 dollar earned by the male counterpart.

- Women in mother-led families and elderly women on their own comprise the largest groups in need of social housing. Many of these women must spend 80% of their disposable income on housing.

- Because of low wages earned during years in the work force and because of time spent out of the work force to care for their children, women's pensions are low. 50% of elderly women live in poverty.

- Many women in mother-led families have suffered abuse in their marriage (physical, emotional, sexual).

Women of all ages and cultural, economic and social backgrounds are single parents. Although the circumstances that led to their situations are different, a general profile based on secondary data can be drawn. The majority are either separated or divorced women, entered relationships and began childbearing at relatively young ages. In addition they tend to have a lower education, but are more likely to be in the work force than wives. The income of mother-led families is generally substantially lower than that of other families.

In spite of these difficulties the vast majority of women interviewed describe themselves as being proud of themselves, their accomplishments and their sense of self-sufficiency as a parent. Some representative comments include:

"It's a relief to know that I have strength and independence."

"I knew exactly where I was going and I haven't strayed a bit."

"I lived on virtually nothing for the first year but I was happier than I'd ever been."

"It was good to know I could survive."

"I know now that I'm a really good mother."

"I developed a stronger relationship with my children after my husband left."

"Now we just go when we want to and nobody feels bad."

"I like making all the decisions. If I want to do it, I just go ahead and do it."

"Our family has become extra close."

"I used to be a homebody, timid, not as good as everyone else. That's all changed now."

"I've learned so much. If only I knew then what I know now."

"There's so much less tension."

"There's no one to disagree with about raising the children."

"Show me something I can't do!"

STATISTICAL OVERVIEW OF MOTHER-LED FAMILIES

Based on Statistics Canada Census data, the percentage of families led by one parent has been steadily increasing in Prince Edward Island and Canada as a whole from 1966 to 1986. A more complete statistical summary is presented in Appendix B.

The percentage of one parent families in 1986 was 12.6% and 12.7% for P.E.I. and Canada respectively, in 1976 the comparable figures were 10.4% and 9.8% respectively, and in 1966 they were 7.5% and 5.7% respectively. There were a total of 4040 one parent families in P.E.I. in 1986, 3305, or 81.8%, of which were mother led; the comparable figure for Canada is 82.2%. The number of one parent families is actually increasing faster than the number of two parent families. It is estimated, based on current trends, that 66% of children born after 1980 will go through a parental divorce before they are 18.

Based on January 1989 data, of the 4282 Social Assistance recipients in P.E.I.:

- 83.5% (3575) are "unattached individuals"
- of those 3575 "unattached individuals", 1261 have dependents (are one parent families) (95.5% (1205) are mother-led)
- of those 1261 one parent families, 4.5% (57) are father-led.
- the 1205 mother-led families receiving social assistance represent 36.5% of all mother-led families in P.E.I.
- of all "families" receiving social assistance in P.E.I., 67.1% were mother-led
- of the 3546 children living in "families" on social assistance, 59.9% (2124) were in mother-led families

Section III

HERSTORY

"It hurt my pride to have to give in
because he was bigger than me.
But now I'm the boss and I like it."

Section III

HERSTORY

This section of the report will briefly describe the experiences of the women interviewed and their families prior to and after becoming a single parent. The women were asked to share their stories in a way that felt most comfortable to them, keeping in mind the following:

- family background
- visions for the future
- marriage and / or the birth of children
  relationship to husband / father of the children
- events surrounding becoming a 'single mother'
- supportive people and groups
- self-image
- housing
- finances
- children's feelings and behaviour

The presentation of this section was a major challenge for the study team. Because of the uniqueness and intensity of each story it was not possible to synthesize the stories and still reflect the real experiences of these women. Also, it was not possible to recount all the stories or to tell those shared here in complete detail. Interview notes on this question were often three or four pages of single spaced writing. Although only 9 of the 29 stories are presented in this section, all the stories were given equal consideration in all other sections of the report. The stories here are presented in two parts, prior to and after becoming a mother-led family. They have been modified slightly to preserve confidentiality.

CATHY

"I was one of six kids and was brought up in a strict Catholic family. My parents were happily married. I got married because I was looking for security. We had a lot of financial strain, but both of us looked forward to the birth of our first baby. Our relationship was on and off again - there was no continuity. I believed that stability was important to the children, so I stayed until after the birth of my second child.

My family was very supportive, my sister babysat for me while I worked. I felt like a failure and was ostracized. I lost my 'couple friends'. I felt like the bottom of my world had fallen out. My four year old son was upset - he visited his father a few times a year. There's a price you pay for control, but its small. I'm slowly coming to grips with this new dimension."

KATE

"My parents had a farm on P.E.I. I met my husband when he came to work with us. I was 13. I hadn't known a lot of men prior to getting married. My parents liked him - we got married. He started drinking and was out a lot. Later I found out that he was having an affair. Everyone knew except for me. I began secretly planning to leave, buying two of everything and stashing it away for the eventual move. When the time was right, I moved out in one and half hours with the help of friends.

I did the right thing. My husband wants me back. He's actually been more attentive to the kids than he ever was. I've had a lot of support from my family and friends. I felt great after the separation - I did all the emotional work before I left. I go out with him sometimes to talk - but I won't go back."

MARY

"I come from a strict religious background. My father was away a lot because he was in the army, so I was really brought up in a single parent home - my mother was wonderful. I got married when I was 19 - I was making an adult statement. He was immature and I had doubts, but I didn't want to disappoint anyone. The first year was wonderful. I had a hard pregnancy with my first child but delivered a son, then I lost three. My husband was emotionally gone by then. The physical abuse started during my second pregnancy. My 'pacifist' husband got a gun - he threatened me and the children - so I left when he threw the dinner at the kids.

> My family was not supportive because I broke the rules. I had severe financial problems and was ashamed of my situation. My eldest daughter had a really rough time. I couldn't find counselling. My family was against me. Lawyers, courts and judges were no good. I almost lost my children because of a lawyer. I wasn't allowed to speak - the judge called me a "nuisance in court".

HELEN

"I come from a strong family background. The church played a major role in my life. My father died when I was young and my mother had a difficult time making ends meet. I met my husband in a bar. It was alcohol that eventually drove us apart, but I didn't recognize that he had the problem at first. During the time we were married, I helped him through a critical illness. I looked after him - I did everything for him. He had a full recovery. He left without even leaving a phone number. It was the hardest day of my life - and for the kids.

> I felt very angry and used. I coped and operated mechanically for awhile. It took three years to accept it. I take one day at a time. My children really haven't given up - they are hurting. My oldest son tries to emulate his father. He knows his father is seeing a woman with a son the same age and he's jealous. It's not easy. His dad keeps distancing himself."

JANE

"My husband was alcoholic but I got a lot of strong support from my kids. There was a lot of fear in the house prior to the separation. I had 6 kids and a physical disability but I had to leave.

Finances were a problem. My parents accepted my decision but they didn't really approve. The separation affected each one of the kids differently. In retrospect post separation we had a lot of fun in the house. It was good to have the kids. It was clearly the right thing to do."

ELIZABETH

"I was the second oldest of eleven. I did a lot of babysitting. We lived on a farm, it was o.k. I got married and we moved out west to make money. We came back east to take over my husband's family farm. Then we adopted two little kids - that was quite a shock. One night my husband came home and said he wasn't happy - he'd met someone else. He moved out that night.

My husband didn't want custody - he didn't want anything at first then each month he started wanting things. I moved out west with my kids and my sister - I took a re-entry course then got a full time job. Transportation, money and child care were very difficult. Then he came out west with his girlfriend. At the Examination of Discovery he admitted putting a new business in his girlfriend's name to avoid paying child support. We had to go to Supreme Court for the divorce because he wouldn't agree to anything. It cost lots of money. He didn't show up the day of the hearing. I was awarded custody of the kids and $500 per month. But what's the point they never check into anything. They never enforce it. I got a total of $300 in 1988."

MARGARET

"I met my husband at my university. I knew he was sick and would not live long but I loved him and I wanted to have his child. Sometimes people would say when he was really sick, "You're getting too strong, you will forget to let go of some of the control when he gets well again" or "Don't you think you're becoming a little too independent". We had 2 children. My husband was able to stay home until 1 week before he died.

I already had full time employment and a house so I was financially secure. I worry about the children's acceptance of their father's death - I wonder if its normal anger they're expressing or is it unresolved feelings about not having a Dad - For a while I tried to be both parents, but now I realize I can't. Recently I had to change jobs - I worry about the new one not having flexible hours and days off as in my previous job. I feel lonely sometimes. I'm not "single" and I'm not "married". That caused changes in some close friendships."

ANNE

"I was married when I was 17. The first 2 years were alright but the last 3 were bad. He was on drugs and he said and did weird things. He kept blaming me for everything. When his father died he moved in with his grandmother. He wasn't really leaving us but he wasn't there. I left with the 2 kids, the knives, forks and spoons.

I moved into the first place I could find but I didn't like it. Then I went back to school to finish my Grade 12. I met a new boyfriend. I thought he was really nice - he was so good to me. Then I got pregnant - even though I had an I.U.D. I was really upset but wanted to keep the baby. Then I found out he was cheating on me so I left him. All these things kept popping up after he was gone - all these lies. And that ruined my faith in men. I've been on social assistance, been in re-entry classes, life skills and I've had some short term jobs. When I first go back to work I get all overwhelmed and see all the stuff that needs to be done at home. Then I'm home and I'm glad to be there but I want to be at work too. It's confusing - I want to do both."

DIANNE

"I got married when I was 20 - we both came from 'dysfunctional' homes. There was a lot of abuse in my childhood - I've been working on that a lot over the past few years - I have a whole library of books of my own. When I look back now I can see that the violence in our relationship was there all along - not against me at first but lots of holes in the walls. He turned it on me when the first baby was born. In reality I've been a single parent since my first child was born. He was an alcoholic and I was responsible for everything and he was hardly ever there. And I never saw his pay cheque. He used head games that no court of law would accept as rape. But as far as I'm concerned it was rape. He tried to strangle me and I was finally frightened enough and brave enough to leave. I had $10.00 and the kids. We went to a transition house.

Its taken a long time and a lot of work to pull myself up and get on the right track. If it weren't for the kids, I'd probably be dead by now. I eat because I have to cook for them but I feel like I'm a really good mother now. I had a lot of counselling, still do and I read a lot. I want so much for my kids to grow up to be happy and well adjusted. I'm determined to get them off welfare."

EMILY

"I was always a dreamer, believed in happy endings. From the time I was 13 all I thought about was getting married. When I got pregnant I made a conscious decision not to tell the baby's father. I knew in the back of my mind that somewhere down the line it would mean a divorce - we were so different - so I skipped all that legal stuff - custody, support and whatever. I was also afraid that he would not allow me to take my child with me if I wanted to come back to P.E.I.

I moved back to P.E.I. and have raised my child all on my own. I don't have any dreams any more. I'm a realistic and responsible person. My dreams are for my daughter now."

Section IV

OVERALL OBSERVATIONS

"It's not nearly as hard as living with someone you don't want to be living with."

Section IV

OVERALL OBSERVATIONS

This Section will present overall observations of the Study Team that emerged throughout the course of the interview process. These observations cannot and do not provide as personal an understanding as the individual stories of the women involved, some of which were presented in Section III.

While the interviews were being conducted, the Study Team comprised of four women interviewers shared experiences with each other, highlighting the strengths, difficulties and insights passed on to us by each of the women who were interviewed. This on-going discussion helped us to formulate a more general overview of the issues we were discovering. This is the picture that emerged.

Uniqueness of each story. The stories told to us were all different. The women interviewed did not comprise a homogeneous group; they had a wide variety of experiences, needs and interests. Some of the unique elements of the stories related to educational, financial and cultural background, family relations and disability or health problems. But in spite of the uniqueness of each story many common threads linking these families were apparent. Observations relating to these common needs, experiences and interests are outlined below..

Lack of understanding on the part of society regarding the reality of mother-led 'families'. Mothers interviewed clearly stated that they lived in "families" and that they thought of themselves and their children as a whole family unit, not as an incomplete family. If a social action is to take place with

respect to mother-led families their needs and aspirations as families must clearly be understood. Discrediting the erroneous 'stereotype' of a "single mother" as a low income, under-educated, unmarried, problem-centred, social assistance family is essential.

For some mothers, being a mother-led family is compounded by a variety of other situational difficulties . These problems include dealing with a disability and health problem of the mother or children, dealing with past abusive and still threatening situations, dealing with isolation and dealing with public services.

Although most stories told to us were fraught with emotional and financial stress immediately after becoming mother-led families, the stories had positive outcomes. Most women expressed confidence that becoming a mother-led family was the right decision. This was not necessarily the case for widowed mothers, although the outcome of their stories were equally 'positive' in many ways.

There was a prevalence of alcohol and or emotional/physical/ sexual abuse. These types of abuse both in childhood and pre-separation were identified by the majority of women interviewed.

The women often described their children as their motivation to succeed. Much pride and many hopes were invested in children, especially with respect to education; mothers generally put plans for their children's future ahead of their own. A common theme among many interviews was that they wanted their children to grow up to be 'well adjusted and happy'. Some concern was raised about male children and the desire to provide a male role model.

Women interviewed were generally very proud of how they were managing their families. This was a common view held by almost all participants. They noted that negative or abusive two parent families are more harmful to the children than those mother-led families which are free from such a stressful atmosphere.

A common theme among many women was the confusion about where they fit in with respect to their social life. They are no longer 'a couple', but because of the children, neither are they 'single'. Many noted that relationships with friends changed; pre separation 'family' friends were often replaced with single mother friends.

Most women talked about feeling lonely sometimes. Many commented that they would like to have a male companion at some time in their life; someone that would be there for them and the children. They emphasized that they didn't need to be 'looked after', but that they would like someone with whom they could share. Many expressed scepticism about the reality/possibility of such a relationship.

Frustration with the legal system as it pertains to mother-led families. Dissatisfaction with the legal system in P.E.I. was pervasive throughout most of the interviews to the point of great discouragement and anger. Some areas of discontent included legal aid, legal fees, maintenance, mediation, attitudes and lack of follow-up for child support payments, and a sense of abandonment by the courts and the justice system.

Lack of information and support services for mothers geared to their special needs: This was a common concern among almost all women interviewed. Previously many had no need of and had given little thought to information on rights, legal matters, family

support and financial assistance and like matters. At a time of great personal and family trauma they found it necessary to reach out for support which was not readily available to them. The stress and the need was most acute in the first year and even though some services may be there and available, they are not recognized as such by those who most need them.

Few linkages, information exchanges, and interagency networking. The women participants appeared to gain strength from the interviews, which they experienced as empowering upon reflecting how much they had learned and grown. They also looked for affirmation about themselves and their experiences and asked for feedback from the report. There was an expressed need for some means for effective sharing of information of activities related to mother-led families, through some kind of informal or formal networking system.

For the most part, people in positions having a direct impact on mother-led families have not had similar experiences and therefore cannot relate to or identify with these women. The failure to understand and take seriously the situation of mother-led families is reflected in the inadequacy of public programs and policies, or in weaknesses in the delivery system.

Section V

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

"I feel like most of us really do
try to get ahead and make something of ourselves."

Section V

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The interviews sought to identify the experiences of women in mother-led families with respect to personal, social, legal and economic concerns in order to gather information needed to effect change. What follows in this section is a synthesis of experiences told to us by these mothers which were all unique but had some major common threads. These stories are presented as the experiences of women in mother-led families in matters of importance to them. Although this is the case, the study team is confident that these findings provide a strong basis for building analysis and taking action.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF WOMEN INTERVIEWED

A total of 29 personal interviews were conducted. The interview participants represented diverse demographic backgrounds as follows:

- Of the 29 women interviewed, 4 were never married, 8 were separated, 15 were divorced and 2 were widowed.

- The mean time frame since they became mother-led was 6.6 years, the median was 5 years and the range was from 2 months to 19 years.

- The mean age of the women interviewed was 37 years; the range was 25 years to 66 years.

- A total of 78 children were involved, the mean was 2.7 children per family and the range was 1 child to 11 children; 63 of these children were 21 years of age and under.

- The majority of families (23) lived in an urban area; 6 lived in a rural area. Most families (22) resided in a house, 6 in an apartment, and 1 in a trailer. The women interviewed expressed general satisfaction with their housing arrangement.

- The majority of women (18) had paid employment outside the home (including one woman who was full-time but seasonal). Two (2) worked part-time, 2 attended university and worked part-time, and 2 were in a re-entry program. Only 5 of the women did not have paid employment at this time or were not presently involved in an educational program.

- Of the 29 women interviewed, 8 were totally self-supporting, 8 were totally government assistance supported (Unemployment Insurance, Social Assistance and Re-entry Programs). Ten (10) were working full time and had other financial assistance (government assistance and/or spousal assistance), and 3 were working part-time and had other financial assistance (government assistance and/or spousal assistance).

- Prior to becoming a single mother, 6 women had under Grade 12 education, 15 had Grade 12 and over, 6 had University Bachelors degrees, and 2 had post graduate degrees.

- After becoming a single mother all 6 women who had under a Grade 12 education went on to complete at least a Grade 12 equivalent, 4 more were pursuing university degrees and 2

were pursuing post graduate degrees. A total of 16 women indicated that they had had work related, job re-entry, general upgrading, and life skills education experiences since becoming a single mother.

PRESENT EXPERIENCE

This section summarizes the findings of the interviews conducted with respect to the womens' current experiences as mother-led families. In particular the following issues were addressed:

- most supportive groups/people
- least supportive groups/people
- government/legal services

Most Supportive Groups

The women interviewed were asked to identify groups and people who have been most supportive and those who have been least supportive of their family. Most of the comments focused on groups and people who have been most supportive. Not surprisingly, the overwhelming majority commented that the extended family, particularly their own children and friends, (both new and pre-becoming mother-led) were most supportive. The following 'most supportive' groups were noted. They are presented in order of most frequent responses.

- family, including extended family, in-laws and children
- friends, including both prior to becoming mother-led 'couple' friends and new 'single' friends
- counsellors
- organized support groups such as the single, widowed, and divorced support group and the single mothers group

- church, primarily individuals who were particularly supportive
- Alcoholics Anonymous
- teachers, not as a whole but individual teachers were described to be very supportive
- Social Services
- Anderson House

Other support groups and people identified more than once included CEIC life skills courses, fathers of their children, fellow workers, neighbours, 'Beginning Experience' (course at Holland College) and employers.

Least Supportive Groups

As noted above, few comments regarding least supportive groups were made. Although this was the case, the overwhelming response to the question by those that responded was that the legal system was the least supportive group. The following least supportive groups were noted and are presented in order of most frequent responses.

- legal system
- father of children
- friends
- school
- 'community'
- church

Other least supportive groups included schoolmates, government agencies, including Unemployment Insurance Commission, psychiatrist, job creation program, individual social worker, landlord, employer, and police.

GOVERNMENT AND LEGAL SERVICES

The study team sought to determine the perceptions of the women interviewed with respect to government and legal services.

Government Services

About half of the women interviewed (16) commented on their experiences with government services; the focus of which was Social Services. The comments regarding these issues were varied although the majority of comments were couched in a critical manner. Many of the comments were focused on the stigma attached to receiving Social Assistance. Women interviewed often noted that the problems related to Social Assistance were compounded in mother-led families because they are women. The following comments are a representative sample of comments made, both positive and critical:

Critical Comments:

> "I never had difficulty getting money from Social Services but I always felt that they were not supportive of single parents."
>
> "I'm not always looking for money - sometimes all I need is a kind word."
>
> "I can't get anything from welfare that will help my kids fit into society (extra curricular activities) - my kids are being denied their rights in society."
>
> "There's not enough money for transportation."
>
> "I've paid enough income tax during my life to allow me to be on Social Assistance, but I fight every day of my life to accept the fact that I am."

"They (Social Services) should do stuff with the family unit - they say they want us to stay together as a family but they don't do anything to encourage that."

"People think they have the right to call Social Services and complain about how we (single mothers) are bringing up our kids."

"Financial assistance must go up with the cost of living."

"You become a good money manager, but there's still not enough for the extras like a hair cut."

"There are lots of single mothers on welfare, but most of us just see it as a stepping stone."

Positive Comments

"I have a good Counsellor; I call her to get help."

"Someday I'll be putting back into the system when I get out working - this system was built for people like me - it's a temporary solution - it's important for me to stay home with the kids now."

"Social Services has been extremely helpful - it has enabled me to go back to university easily."

"Welfare is not as limited as it used to be - for example, training, courses, counselling - that was not around when my mom was on welfare."

"The child care subsidy was great."

In addition to these comments, the discussion group noted the inconsistencies in the delivery services depending on the individual counsellor.

Legal Services

Almost all of the women interviewed (22) commented on legal services as they pertained to their mother-led situation. The frustration, discouragement and anger with the legal system was one of the most striking findings of the interview process. Dissatisfaction with the legal system was pervasive throughout most of the interviews; very few women expressed satisfaction with the current system. It was generally felt mother-led families were very dependent on the legal system but that it was not organized to respond fully or fast enough to human need. The following sample of representative comments, grouped in broad categories, were made.

Overall comments

"The legal system is the worst thing about being a mother-led family."

"The legal system stinks."

"Justice system is not very accommodating and is very threatening."

"I felt like a number."

"I had an exceptional lawyer - who gave me good advice."

"Mental, emotional and physical abuse was difficult to cope with on top of high legal fees."

"Restraining order - a lot of bureaucratic hassle."

"I had to go to court over and over, because of lack of cooperation of my husband. I ended up getting exactly what I asked for in the beginning but it cost thousands of dollars in the end."

Legal Aid

"I didn't qualify for legal aid although I felt I should have."

"I was put on a six months waiting list - obviously not a priority case - they were blunt and I didn't like their attitude - I was put off and never wanted to call them again but I did and got put off again."

"I wasn't happy with legal aid - they just tolerated me - they didn't fight for me - it really felt like a budget service."

"Their attitude (legal aid) was let's get it over with - I would have been better to hire a lawyer."

"I consulted with legal aid regarding custody - I was delighted it was a woman - she was easy to talk to."

Mediation

"Mediation was a complete bust - father didn't want anything to do with it."

"I avoided mediation."

"Mediation stopped because my husband wanted it to stop although the mediator was very supportive."

Child Support

"Father pays when it fits his schedule."

"There is no follow-up once child support payments are decided by the courts."

"I was not encouraged to pursue child support as the father was in another province."

"I was awarded $600 a month in one province, but when I came back to P.E.I. the courts said he only had to pay $100, and I hardly ever see that"

DIFFICULTIES

The interview participants were asked to comment on the difficulties they are experiencing as mother-led families. Some common difficulties did emerge which were primarily a result of their substantially lower family income, increased responsibilities, lack of time and lack of job security. The following summarizes the findings. They are presented in order of most frequent responses.

- financial constraints
- accepting the entire responsibility for self and the children
- job security
- lack of time
- legal system
- not spending enough time with the children
- child care
- loneliness
- negative attitude of society
- boredom on weekends
- difficulty in getting back go school
- job flexibility
- housing
- transportation

Other difficulties identified included: isolation, lack of information, limited social life, parenting adolescents alone, raising children (particularly boys), and the school system.

The discussion group indicated that difficulties related primarily to:

- legal system
- lack of information and support systems
- financial constraints
- isolation
- negative attitude of society

SKILLS AND STRENGTHS ACQUIRED

The women were asked to comment on what they had learned from their experiences of becoming a single mother, and to comment on the strengths and skills they had acquired. The comments were diverse; the following is a sample:

> "I learned what my rights are and that I'm not crazy."
>
> "I recognized my part in a bad relationship - the challenge is for me to find a relationship that works."
>
> "You have to look out for yourself."
>
> "Children are more flexible than husbands."
>
> "I trust my own judgement - I don't question myself so much."
>
> "Children must be given continuity and calmness."
>
> "Happiness is within - marriage doesn't make happiness."
>
> "Marriage is just the icing on the cake, but I'm the cake."
>
> "I'm not scared of being alone."
>
> "I'm more aware of people's difficulties - more compassionate."

"I learned about myself - I'm stronger than I thought."

"I like who I am."

"It's hard."

"Enter relationships slowly."

"Life is what you make it."

"I don't feel that I need a man around except for a few fringe benefits - sometimes it would be nice."

"I learned to speak up for myself."

"I learned good money management skills."

"I'm more self-confident and self-reliant."

"I've learned how to manage my family very well."

"I'm more assertive and aggressive."

"I'm more independent and a better decision maker."

LAST WORDS

At the end of the interviews the women were asked to think in general terms about their experiences and the experiences of other mother-led families. They were asked to describe their vision for the future for both their families and mother-led families in general. They were also asked what other women could learn from their experience. This is what they told us.

Visions for the future

Many of the women had some difficulty looking too far into the future, although they had quite definite plans for the future for

their children. The women made more comments about their own families than about mother-led families in general.

Visions for their family

"It scares me when I think about it"

"I hope some day to have a car, even if it's an old clunker"

"I'm tired of scrounging - I hope to have a good job"

"I hope to get into another relationship"

"My focus for the future is clearly on the kids"

"I can only live day-by-day"

"If I choose a future relationship, it will have to be with someone who is complete and whole on his own - a relationship not based on need."

"I want to see my child to financial independence - that's all I think about - then something for myself"

"The better I get, the better the kids get"

"I want job security"

"No marriage - no sex"

"I want to become self supporting"

Visions for mother-led families in general

"Mother led families must become an acceptable option in the way marriage is"

"I hope for better services and support within the legal system"

"It's very important that Social Services have an understanding of the single mother's experience and frustration."

"There's a need to educate society - you still run across people who say that you must have done something wrong to make him drink etc.....)"

"I would like to see children belonging to a community - an extended family concept - not just one mother totally responsible - that would alleviate a lot of the pressures"

What other women can learn

The words of wisdom passed on to other women were in general strong and directed toward believing in yourself.

"You can get what you want - don't be intimidated."

"Nurture friendships."

"Have the courage to do what you want to do."

"People must communicate - especially men and women living together - they must express their feelings."

"Be aware of running away from the real issues."

"When you enter a relationship, go slowly."

"If you don't know the answers, find someone who does."

"Maintain your independence, even when you're married."

"Marriage is great if you find the right person."

"Don't put yourself on hold for the children."

"You're not alone."

"Don't live your life for others."

"Share your experiences with other single mothers to empower them."

Messages to society

Messages from the women to society were most often directed toward dispelling the image they feel has been created about them by people who do not understand their experiences. This is what they have to say:

> "There are a lot of single mothers - everything is couple oriented so we are left out of a lot of things"
>
> "We're doing fine - we're just a normal family"
>
> "It's a hard role - to wear two hats - double headaches but double joys"
>
> "We're a self sufficient bunch"
>
> "Single women aren't easy, loose or 'available'"
>
> "There's a lot of woman and child abuse - be aware of it"
>
> "It's not my fault - please stop taking it out on me and my children"
>
> "We aren't bums - just people trying to make it"
>
> "It's not what life gives you - it's what you do with it"
>
> "Recognize the strength in single mothers - recognize that there are a lot of obstacles"
>
> "Give us a boost, instead of looking down on us"

Section VI

SUMMARY PROPOSALS FOR SOCIAL ACTION

"Society needs to pitch in and help - it's not an impossible task."

Section VI

SUMMARY AND PROPOSALS FOR SOCIAL ACTION

PROPOSALS FOR SOCIAL ACTION

Priority Actions

Project research revealed a low level of understanding of the needs and aspirations of mothers in mother-led families, an overwhelming frustration with the legal system in general, and an overall lack of information and support services for these mothers. The situation described to the study team warrants major actions to reflect the significance of these issues identified.

1) **The Committee, in consultation with the Advisory Council on the Status of Women, should assist in presenting the reality of mother-led families so as to promote acceptance, gather support, and elicit participation in social action for change to the following groups;**

   a) **Mothers in mother-led families** to increase their awareness of rights and support services and to encourage use of available resources.

   b) **Legal system as it pertains to mother-led families** to recognize the particular dangers and other difficulties faced by these families and to encourage change.

c) **Social Services** to increase awareness and understanding of the compounded difficulties faced by the women in mother-led families and to secure their involvement in future actions.

d) **Counsellors, employers, church, women's and community groups** to recognize the needs and aspirations of these women, and to secure involvement for change.

e) **General public** to ensure that they are in support of public action regarding mother-led families.

The public launching of this report will provide an opportunity to initiate such an awareness program. This should be followed up with a series of briefs to selected groups and authorities seeking action or support, as appropriate. A request should be included to each government agency for a contact person for follow-up purposes. This proposal may be implemented at minimal cost to the Committee.

2) **The Committee, in consultation with the Advisory Council, should encourage an appropriate body to sponsor a provincial conference on mother-led families, focusing on the women's experiences.** This conference should include representatives from the interests noted above. Such a conference could provide a strong anchor for an awareness program. It could provide an opportunity for groups to give guidance on further actions and could also begin improved networking and information exchange regarding mother-led families.

The conference should have a high profile through pre, during, and post conference publicity, and should be action oriented. It should be held in the Fall of 1989 to capitalize on the interest generated by this report.

3) **The Committee, in consultation with the Advisory Council, supports further examination by all relevant groups and agencies of the major issues identified in this report and endorsed by the Conference.** Issues involving and deeply affecting mother-led families have been trivialized by society in the lack of attention given to them. The serious impact of single parent status on large and growing numbers of families, parents, and children has been intensified by social neglect. There is now a need to move on an issue-by-issue basis, persevering to resolution. Action on issues should consider as well what has been achieved in other provinces.

4) **Our research indicates that a separate review of the legal system as it pertains to mother-led families is clearly needed.** Throughout the interviews, dissatisfaction with the legal system on P.E.I. was pervasive. The study team proposes that additional research on the legal system be carried out by the Department of Justice to determine how the rights, interests, safety and security of mother-led families can be safeguarded. Such a study should extend to Legal Aid, mediation, maintenance, interests, safety and security of mother-led families, court proceedings, discovery, arrangements for child support, and follow-up (or lack thereof), restraining orders, police and attitudes. The Advisory Council on the Status of Women should approach the Minister of Justice to secure his support in

commissioning such a study, and to do a complete review of the P.E.I. Family Law Reform Act, and other legal support services.

Other Proposed Actions

The actions proposed below, although of significant importance, are secondary to the four actions noted above. It is possible that some of these proposals which follow might be altered or changed as a result of activities conducted as outlined above.

5) **The Committee, in consultation with the Advisory Council, should encourage the appropriate bodies to sponsor the compilation of a handbook for mother-led families.** Lack of information of rights and available services was a common problem among most of the women interviewed. This should not be a conventional handbook of information but should be mainly a series of HOW TO instructions covering such matters as: Rights, Financial Assistance, Housing, Counselling, Shelters, legal matters, and Education, child care, etc. It should incorporate a series of one-page "case studies" showing how other women have dealt with their situations.

6) **The Committee, in consultation with the Advisory Council, should encourage inter-agency networking among interests and organizations working with mother-led families.** This could be achieved through semi-annual workshops, whose agenda should be organized around the first four recommendations of this report.

7) **The Committee, in consultation with the Advisory Council, supports all relevant groups and agencies in facilitating regional Mother-led Family support groups.** There appears to be a strong need for more support groups for women in mother led families. Some suggestions for facilitating include: provision of transportation and child care, space for meetings, and administrative support.

8) **The Committee, in consultation with the Advisory Council, supports all relevant community groups and government agencies in promoting a Support Service for mothers of mother-led families within existing services or agencies.** Such a service could incorporate a Hot Line service to women seeking advice from a separation. A resource centre could also be sponsored.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTERVIEW NO ____

MOTHER LED FAMILIES

PROFILE - PHASE 1

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

_____

PHONE NUMBER _____

DATE OF INTERVIEW _____

INTERVIEWER _____

DATES CALLED _____

INTERVIEW #:

1 INTRODUCTION

- MARITAL STATUS
  never married _____
  separated _____
  divorced _____
  widowed _____
  legally separated _____
- WHEN DID YOU BECOME A SINGLE MOTHER ? _____
- AGE _____ ETHNIC BACKGROUND _____
- CHILDREN

names	ages	grade/ daycare	living situation

- LIVING ARRANGEMENT

  rural / urban _____ owned / rented _____
  house / apartment _____ with others _____

  satisfaction - general comments _____

- EMPLOYMENT OUTSIDE THE HOME (descriptive)

- FINANCIAL SITUATION (descriptive and $ if appropriate)

  self supporting _____ government assistance _____
  assistance from partner _____ assistance from family _____
  general comments _____

- EDUCATION (formal & informal)

  prior to becoming a single mother

  since becoming a single mother

  general comments

- LEGAL (descriptive)

  mediation

  justice system

  arrangements with ex partner

2 HERSTORY

a) Tell me about yourself prior to becoming a 'single mother'

- place of birth & upbringing
- siblings / parents
- visions of the future (as a child)
- events / feelings / circumstances surrounding the time of marriage / birth of first child, other children
- relationship with partner / father of children
- events surrounding becoming a 'single mother'

3 PRESENT EXPERIENCE

a) Please describe a typical day in your life.

b) What groups/people are most supportive of you and your children?

- partner / ex partner
- relatives
- organized support groups
- friends
- counsellors
- government agencies
- teachers
- children's activities
- others

c) What groups / people are least supportive?

d) Please describe your experience with government / legal services. Do you see any progress / improvement over the past five years? Please describe.

4 CONCERNS

a) What difficulties are you experiencing as a mother led family? What would make life easier? (What could you do? / How could others help?)

b) What have you learned from your experience of being a mother-led family? How have you grown? What strengths/skills have you acquired?

5 LAST WORDS

a) What is your vision for the future? (short / long term)
- for you and your family
- for society / mother led families in general

b) What can other women learn from your experience?

c) What would you like to say to society about you and your family?

b) After becoming a single mother, how did your life change?

- where did you go for help
- self image / image you think others had / have
- housing
- finances
- children's feelings / behaviour / experience
- emotional changes
- relationship with family / friends
- personal / support

APPENDIX B

STATISTICAL OVERVIEW

EXHIBIT 1 - Number of One-Parent Families and Percentage of Families which are One Parent Families for P.E.I. and Canada for Selected Years.

	Prince Edward Island			Canada		
	Number of One-Parent Families	Total Number of Families	% of Families which are One-Parent Families	No. of One-Parent Families	Total Number of Families	% of Families which are One-Parent Families
1966	1,706	22,728	7.5	259,834	4,526,266	5.7
1971	2,435	24,170	10.1	477,525	5,053,170	9.5
1976	2,875	27,560	10.4	559,330	5,727,895	9.8
1981	3,660	30,220	12.1	714,010	6,324,975	11.3
1986	4,040	32,070	12.6	853,640	6,734,975	12.7

EXHIBIT 2 - Percentage changes in Number of One-Parent Families and Total Number of Families for P.E.I. and Canada for Selected Periods.

	Prince Edward Island		Canada	
	% Change in One - Parent Families	% Change in Total Number of Families	% Change in One-Parent Families	% Change in Total Number of Families
1966-71	+42.7	+6.3	+83.8	+11.6
1971-76	+18.1	+14.0	+17.1	+13.4
1976-81	+27.3	+9.7	+27.7	+10.4
1981-86	+10.4	+6.1	+19.6	+6.5
1966-86	+137.0	+41.0	+229.0	+49.0

EXHIBIT 3 - Mother-Led/Father-Led Families as Percentage of All One-Parent Families

	Total Number of Lone-Parent Families	% of All Families	% of One-Parent Families which are Mother-Led	% of One-Parent Families which are Father-Led
P.E.I.	4,040	12.6	81.8	18.2
Canada (1986)	853,640	12.7	82.2	17.8

EXHIBIT 4 - Caseload of People on Social Assistance (P.E.I. 1988)

	Total	% of All Social Assistance Cases	With Dependents	%	No Dependents	%
Couples	707	16.5	534	12.5	173	4.0
Unattached Individuals	3,575	83.5	1,262	29.5	2,313	54.0
TOTAL	4,282	100.0	1,796	41.9	2,486	58.1

EXHIBIT 5 - Breakdown of *Unattached Individuals on Social Assistance

	Total	% of All Unattached Individuals	With Dependents	%	No Dependents	%
Male	1,213	33.9	57	1.6	1,156	32.3
Female	2,362	66.1	1,205	33.7	1.157	32.4
TOTAL	3,575	100.0	1,262	35.3	2,313	64.7

EXHIBIT 5(i)

	Unattached Individuals on Social Assistance with Dependents	Unattached Individuals on Social Assistance - No Dependents
Male	4.5	50
Female	95.5	50

EXHIBIT 5 (ii)

Total Number of Mother-Led Families	Number of Mother-Led Families on Social Assistance	% of Total
3,305	1,205	36.5

*Term used by Department of Health and Social Services.

EXHIBIT 5 (iii)

Total Number of Families on Social Assistance	Number of Mother-Led Families on Social Assistance	% of Total
1,796	1,205	67.1

EXHIBIT 6 - Marital Status of Mother-Led Families on Social Assistance

Status	Number	% of Total
Married/Common-Law	47	3.9
Widowed	55	4.6
Divorced	119	9.9
Separated	554	46.0
Never Married	430	35.7
TOTAL	1,205	100.0

EXHIBIT 7 - Average Ages of Unattached Individuals on Social Assistance

	With Dependents	No Dependents
Male	42.3	40.7
Female	47.2	32.8

EXHIBIT 8 - Number of Children on Social Assistance

		% of Total
Number of Children with Couples	1,317	37.1
Number of Children with Female	2,124	59.9
Number of Children with Male	105	3.0
TOTAL	3,546	100.0